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## NO SET REQUIREMENT OF ENGLISH COMPOSITION IN THE FRESHMAN YEAR<sup>1</sup>

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I suspect that the opinion implied in my subject, "No Set Requirement in Composition for Freshmen," is not a popular opinion, and that in holding it I am one of a small minority. But if I try your patience in what I am about to say, please bear with me; for, right or wrong, I am convinced that this opinion has not had due consideration and that, before it is forever cast out as false, it will have to be reckoned with.

First, two brief explanations are in order. By "no set requirement" I understand "no prescribed course in composition, that is, primarily in composition." Furthermore, I must add that I do not think the prescribed course should be postponed to the Sophomore year or to the Junior year, but that there should be *no required course in composition at all*. At Princeton there is no prescribed course in Freshman composition; indeed, no prescribed course in composition at all. It is true, I believe, that the majority of the English staff regard such a course as comparatively extravagant and unprofitable. This conclusion is based upon former experience in the matter. On the other hand, I must in all fairness say that a minority, composed of the less experienced teachers, wish to see a course in composition prescribed for all Freshmen, or all Sophomores, though I am not sure that they agree as to the details. Nothing, then, that I have to say should be regarded as expressing the unanimous opinion of the department, and indeed there may be details of this paper to which none of my colleagues would subscribe.

The parent and the employer—our constituency as American teachers of English—are agreed in their demand for required

<sup>1</sup> Read before the English Conference of the Association of Colleges and Preparatory Schools of the Middle States and Maryland, at Albany, November 29, 1913.

English composition. They reason, and rightly, that an educated person should be able to express himself correctly and decently; that it is not decent to spell according to whim, to write clumsily or unintelligibly; they say that a person is *not* educated who is found wanting in the proprieties and even the graces of written and spoken expression, and that a college which says he is, by tagging him with a degree, is not telling the truth nor doing its proper duty. In this our great constituency is right—for once—and we have the unusual pleasure of agreeing with it.

But our great constituency says further that it is our business to attend directly to these visible defects in expression, to correct them, to establish prescribed courses in which they are to be trained out of students, and, by causing them to disappear, to prove that our graduates are educated after all. Out of this demand for visible correctness and propriety have grown the prescribed courses in composition which have imposed such a terrible burden and expense upon our colleges.

Now, in point of fact is there not something actually superficial, something utilitarian, about this way of meeting the difficulty? Are not these deficiencies, inabilities, and improprieties in utterance due to a deeper disorder? Are these not the mere outward symptoms of intellectual weakness, immaturity, sluggishness—in short, of a lack of real education? And are we likely to cure the disorder by attacking the symptoms and trying by such attack to make them disappear? Symptoms are not curable unless the seat of the fundamental disorder is discovered, its nature is determined, and order and health are restored. Then they disappear as a matter of course. Probably in the case of English composition, the fundamental disorders are not even merely mental; they may in part be a matter of character itself. If we are right in this, the treatment of the disorder must be deep-reaching. It must concern itself with the very springs of the student's nature and action and expression.

This then should be our first, indeed our only, business as teachers—to endeavor by all devices in our power to make each student more sensitive, more accurately and widely observant, more just, more consistent, more spiritual. Just so far as we

succeed in this, just that far shall we have carried him toward attaining the gift of utterance. Without something to utter, his utterance is idle. Shall we therefore, in our zeal to make the plant grow gracefully, forget to stir, enrich, and fertilize the soil?

I am more deeply convinced, the longer I teach, that this enriching and fertilizing of the soil is to be accomplished, so far as *we* can accomplish it, by the influences of literature and all that that implies, rather than by the direct teaching of composition. The mere imparting of a technique is a slow and impractical way of making young men more sensitive, more observant, more just, more consistent, more spiritual. I am aware that teachers of composition will reply, with some feeling, perhaps, that they are not merely imparting technique. But whether or no, the mere teaching of composition is technical, and, in so far as it takes precedence, it is not in the best sense of the term a liberal study.

At this point let me recall that I am giving my reasons for not favoring a set requirement in English composition in the Freshman or Sophomore year. "But," one may ask, "should there be no composition at all, at least none before the Junior year?" I do not mean to imply that. Composition can be used to great advantage at all times, but invariably it should be subordinated; it should be one of the ancillary devices employed in the process of genuine liberal education. Every piece of written work in every subject should be an exercise in composition. No defect in spelling, structure, or turn of sentence should pass unchallenged; the teacher's vigilance in these matters should be unrelenting, and his attack upon them tireless.

In the arrangements for preceptorial teaching at Princeton, conditions have been peculiarly favorable to placing composition in its right relation to larger objects of teaching. The courses are primarily literary—I mean the substance of the courses is good literature. Once a week at least the preceptor informally meets each group of three to seven men, organized if possible with due consideration to congeniality and workableness, for discussion of the literature assigned for reading. His object is not to test whether a student has done his reading, but to establish, so far as may be, a living connection between the literature and the

student, that its influences may be released upon him. To this end he abandons all formality of the classroom, everything that hints of prescribed pedagogical process. He employs every device that his skill, his purpose as a liberalizer, his acquaintance with the student can suggest to him, as the handiest means of working that change in the student's nature which we have described. The discussion—for the conference usually takes this form—often leaves the bounds of the assignment and follows a course, which, in a narrower sense, would not be called literary. The preceptor must, of course, guide it, keep it from dissipating or becoming insignificant, and his chief object is not to have it merely go on, but to see that it amounts to something. He must, in short, become something of an artist, performing his task by a kind of instinct, and not by rote.

What has composition to do with this? For composition at opportune moments must supplement it, serve to define impressions, to make occasion for the student to pursue some inquiry or subject of especial interest, to formulate or test his ideas more deliberately than can be done in the conference, to seize and appropriate what he has gained by the discussion. To this end the preceptor must watch his student closely. He must seize, if he can, the moment when the student's mind is most active, and recognize the subject upon which he is working, as *the* moment and *the* subject for composition. To this end it is often best to seek a private talk with a student who should be writing, to enable him to find his subject, and, if practicable, to have another talk while the composition is in process. It is my conviction that more of the art of composition can be taught while the act of composing is going on, than in thrice as much discussion of the final cooled and hardened result.

The purpose of such training, to reform the intellectual and spiritual health of the student, should never be forgotten while it is in progress. Each decision should be made with reference to it, and each exercise guided by it. There are, of course, students who do not respond to it, whether through their own fault or that of the teacher. But this is true of all methods. It is peculiarly adapted to the training of the *better* men. In this day of the

worship of "the Average," if not at all times, that is perhaps what we most need in education.

In English, and in certain other departments at Princeton, the arrangement has been made, and wisely, I think, that where preceptor and student work well together, the same preceptor shall guide the student throughout his four years. In this way he has opportunity to watch the progress of things. The results which he is after are pretty deep-reaching and slow to appear, but they are sure. I am, as a rule, surprised to see them distinctly before the middle of the Junior year. But when they come, they come in large measure. And in the Senior year, as a rule, comes the real demand on the student's part for some actual training in composition.

This conforms pretty closely to the opinion of one who, in these matters as in most others, was so fortified by his knowledge of the past, and his delicate sense of perennial human needs, that it cannot easily be gainsaid:

And that which casts our proficiency so much therein behind is our time lost . . . partly in a preposterous action, forcing the empty wits of children to compose themes, verses, and orations, which are the acts of ripest judgment, and the final work of a head filled by long reading and observing, with elegant maxims and copious invention. These are not matters to be wrung from poor striplings like blood out of the nose, or the plucking of untimely fruit.

And again:

Now, *lastly*, will be the time to read . . . those organic arts, which enable men to discourse and write perspicuously, elegantly, and according to the fittest style, of lofty, mean, or lowly. . . . From hence, *and not till now*, will be the right season of forming them to be able writers and composers in every excellent matter, when they shall be thus fraught with an universal insight into things.

There should, therefore, be room for a course in composition in a variety of literary forms, toward the end of the college course, open to those who really care to write. At this point, under pressure of lively feeling and opinion from within, with a definite notion of what he wishes to do, and enough desire to make him patient in practice, the student will have learned, and does learn, about writing what he might in his shallower and more sterile days have wasted precious time over, without learning it particularly well, and to the neglect of more pressing matters.